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The Hand of God in the Great Man :

A

S E R M O N

DELIVERED IN THE WEST CHURCH, BOSTON,

OCCASIONED BY THE

DEATH OF DANIEL WEBSTER.

BY C. A. BARTOL,

JUNIOR MINISTER.

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S E C O N D E D I T I O N .

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S E R M O N.

PSALM LXXV. 1, 6, 7 : — “ UNTO THEE, O GOD, DO WE GIVE THANKS. . . . FOR PROMOTION COMETH NEITHER FROM THE EAST, NOR FROM THE WEST, NOR FROM THE SOUTH. BUT GOD IS THE JUDGE : HE PUTTETH DOWN ONE, AND SETTETH UP ANOTHER.”

WE meet this morning with one feeling. When, at God's decree, human greatness from all its state falls to the ground like a leaf ; when death, usually doing its work in silence, seems to cry out over the bier of the high and distinguished ; when some figure, that has moved with imposing tread in our sight, towers still more out of the dark valley ; when the drapery of mourning unrolls itself from private chambers to line the streets, darken the windows, and hang the heavens in black ; when the stroke of the bell adds a sabbath solemnity to the days of the week, and the boom of guns, better fired over the dead than at the living, echoes all through our territory ; while the wheels of business stop, and labor leans its head, and trade foregoes its gains, and communication, save on

one theme, ceases, — we may well ask the meaning and cause.

There is a severity proper to the occasions of the pulpit. It was reared for the praise of God, and cannot lightly echo with that of human beings. He that occupies it forgets its dignity, when he postpones God's worship to a man's eulogy; and they who listen, forget its duty, when they would prescribe any private will for the proclamation of heavenly truth. Yet there are earthly events of such moment, that they may sometimes with the Word of God furnish a fit theme for religious discourse. Nay, all events that lay strong hold of the attention of men, and create universal interest, should be turned to a moral use. The death of the greatest man in a nation, in the language of Job, like a mountain falling, supplies a chosen opportunity for general reflection and instruction. As an earthquake, while rending the place of its outburst, makes remote regions tremble; and the storm, that mingles sea and sky where it breaks, lashes with some wave or ripple the farthest shore, — so such a decease will affect the common mind and sense of the race.

There is, indeed, something wonderful in the power exercised by a truly great mind. It draws lesser natures to itself, as the central orb does planets and satellites; and the spell which it lays does not cease with mortal dissolution, but the sense of it abides, so

that men familiarly refer to it as still sensible. It is thought King William will turn in his coffin at the disgrace of his country. The ashes of Napoleon certainly have fire in them to this day. And that extraordinary personage just gone, belonging to the class of imperial intellects, seems yet to walk the earth, never so strong as now he is in his tomb, mightier dead than any behind him living; presides in the thought of our land, while rival candidates aspire to its high places; spite of neglect passing him by, or abusive tongues loosened against him, exacts his meed of applause; triumphs in the appropriation of enthusiasm, though not of votes; and writes his name high on the banners of opposing parties.

But my object to-day is not so much to praise him, as to praise God in him. I think our feeling is less of the transcendent merit of the man, than of his extraordinary endowment from his Maker. The Almighty has the credit of him! No such person rises out of human will, or can quite make himself by any study or industry. Our phrase is a true one, — that he is raised up. God made and moulded him for an instrument of power, for a vessel of honor, and a lamp to shine beyond a private dwelling over the land. While many panegyrics have already been pronounced upon this leading counsellor and pre-eminent civilian, I have thought it best to wait till the season of composure after the first shock of his decease has passed

away. We do not wish our friend to be delineated to us the moment after he is dead. Our thoughts at first best describe him with their silent oratory; and we would have nothing come instead of the witness of our own hearts.

Besides, of one who has been public property while he lived, and is public property, in his memory and fame, when he dies, it is difficult to speak at first with the sobriety and equity which we may use when we have become calm. It is long before the heart consents to any measured estimate. We will have our hero unparalleled and spotless. Our inclination to wrap the errors of humanity in its winding-sheet; to shut our eyes on every blemish in our favorites, and declare them immaculate; to resent qualified laudation, and, according to the ancient precept, say nothing of the dead but good, beautifully shows at least the thirst which the human soul has for the perfect. Yet our admiration of excellence, or our jealousy for an idol, would more wisely admit the drawbacks in any actual example, than let down the supreme standard of right.

On consideration, different persons, according to their diverse prepossessions, will somewhat variously regard one who both vastly exceeded the proportions of his fellows, and bore the stamp and moved in the course of qualities so individually his own. You will let me, instead of spreading out the details of his

biography, or recounting his public services, which will be done by many voices and every press in the land, endeavor, as with few strokes I may be able, to draw the man himself. Again, I must say, I think of the part his Former had in him. The creature refers to the Creator. What principally strikes us all, I think, is not any thing in the circumstances of his life, or the achievements of his career, or the acquired qualities of his character, so much as the original capacity of his nature, — the spirit within him as the gift of God, as the son of New England, the chief representative of the American mind, and the child and sponsor among us of our forefathers. His stalwart soul and body seem by an infinite hand to have been shaped out of the granite of his own hills; and, through all culture, all education, all civilization, and policy with its smoothing process of half a century, the rugged primitive simplicity of the man was strangely preserved. The discipline of training, the force of example, the dexterities of legal procedure, the courtesies of high life, the deep manœuvres and cunning snares of party, the plans and over-reachings of politicians, could not alter this original shape, or twist the direction of his nature, any more than the tools of an engraver or a covering with inscriptions can change the features of pyramid and obelisk tending to the skies. Verily his promotion came not from the East, nor from the West, nor from the South,

but from his own divinely pre-ordained ascendancy, bearing him to the highest seat of power, though it never opened the supreme post of office. The primeval impulse in him always worked. If he labored hard in any pursuit, it was not so much from any forward will which distinguishes some, or any quick and flaming imagination that characterizes others, but because the toiling brain, through all that was unpromising in a slow and bashful temperament, and all that was unpretending in a Puritanic way of thought, bore him inevitably on. It is an indication of this natural might and simplicity that to the last his native soil claimed its portion in him; and the very dust, that he was akin to, drew him away from splendid success, from triumphant debate, from busy streets and magnificent prosperity. Not only was the child father of the man, but the man went back to the freshness and innocence of the child, to his old filial reverence and fraternal generosity; and from his father's house and field the boy carried to the end of his days a special respect, among other occupations, for the simple character of the tillers of the ground. Through all the changes of life and modifications of opinion, which he, like other men, experienced, a certain rocky stability and sincerity, as of the unpolished ledge, jutted out. His words were always close to the thing that he dealt with. He had little to do with abstractions or pretensions or rhetoric. He never

used merely fine or fastidious expressions. Every sentence and accent from his mouth had meaning, and was alive and sensitive with the life of his heart and soul. The brilliancy of his style was but the kindling of its solidity, and the pomp of his marching periods according to the invincible ranks of his argument. A nature gravitating to the truth, and a logic as of wrought iron, made him perhaps as powerful an advocate as ever lived. Native force of sensibility was his seal, and he carried through the world the title that God at the beginning put into his hand. Not possessing the highest order of genius, nor reaching the loftiest height of character; not, by extreme moral pains-taking, refining himself into a saint, nor fastening his eye, with celestial vision, on spiritual realities, to sublime himself into a martyr; he rather looked outward with clear strong sight upon the world and the actual things of the world. He looked at his country, and loved his country. He might well say he would speak as an American; for he was an American, in all the continental length and breadth of meaning in that word, as much as any man that walks this Western soil. He had, as clear perhaps as any man, a conception of America, and of the progress, safety, and glory of these United States; and I believe he was true to his conception. If he were ever untrue, it was not wittingly, but from unconscious bias. His conception, indeed, was not ideal; for he was not

by constitution a poet or a metaphysical philosopher, but a practical man, acting and arguing for the case in hand and the pressing necessity, intuitively perceiving and gigantically grasping every thing related to the emergency in which he strove, and with eagle eye discerning the actual issues of each passing affair.

In endeavoring to mark the intellectual kind which this man was of, and stood at the head of, I ascribe to him no low motives of conduct. I suppose his motives to have been patriotic and religious. There was in him a candor, a moderation, a justice, a natural piety, always manifest in what he did and said, and in admirable contrast with the censorious and disingenuous extravagance sometimes, alas! blasphemously brought to the defence of right principles and a good cause. I have no inclination to re-open here any questions discussed by him, on which the community has been divided. I should scorn to lift a finger in any controversy with the dead. Conscious only of intellectual benefits to be joyfully acknowledged, and of no harm to my convictions from the great departed, — though differing with him, as the humblest may, in the judgment of some things, — I differed less seriously with him than with those who have been bitter against him, and have toiled to blacken him with exaggerations of fault, or to blow upon him with that foul breath of ignorant slander, which, against the distinguished,

Rumor avails herself of every circumstance, either to magnify or excite. It was his fate to spend his life, though not in the bloody field, yet as a warrior; to go from the close encounters of the courts to the sharpest and hottest conflicts of parties; and strange would it be if no mistakes had ever been committed by him, and no malignities engendered against him, however elevated his own course. Undoubtedly he coveted the chief station; but he aspired that he might do good in it, and justify, if he could, the principles he had defended, and the measures he had advised. If he did wrong,—as every man, save the Divine One has done,—still, the broad nature of the man appeared, and there was an honesty of religious conscience in him that plainly and directly told him of the wrong he had done. He did not palter with himself in a double sense, or sophisticate the eternal distinction of right and wrong. He had not the facility with which some, in public or private life, can do iniquity and violate all principle, yet wear about the unruffled face as of purity, and appear to avoid, in their dull conscience, any sting. If he knowingly sinned, he owned his sin to God and his soul. He did not and could not escape the sin. It preyed on his big heart! It wrote a tragedy of glory obscured in his grand and adamant face. It put him at war with himself. The naturally proud man, with his weighty, and, not seldom, somewhat austere presence,

whom no opposition could daunt or threat overawe, from whom danger or assault only brought forth the low growl or tremendous roar, bowed his head to the decrees of God, with mournful but free consent took every blow of compensation, and yielded his cheek to the furrows of pain from the hand which had a right to plough them ; while, as genuine in his prayer to the High Disposer as in his plea at a human bar, gushed out his entreaty of forgiveness through Jesus Christ. It is sometimes said, great men, counting on impunity, and heedless of the obligations that bind their inferiors, can do as they please. He had no such theory. He was too wise and just to expect judgment according to any such rule ; but, owning — yea, as a higher law, above all human statutes — the commands of the Sovereign One, he nobly bent his brow to abide by the sentence of the Almighty, and implore the pardon of God.

This genuineness, which was the archetype and key-note of his character, adds a singular value to his judgment of Christianity. He was no formal pretender to faith ; but he believed. He could hardly have been a mere professor of any thing. The rude, downright force of his nature would have forbidden. A ship of war must sail on the high seas or in deep channels, and cannot turn and wind like lighter craft through every crooked strait. The great religious soul which God gave him inspired all his composition, filled his

language with power to quicken the adoration of thousands, bound the sentiment of his breast in a steady, unfaltering loyalty to the gospel, made him pay respect without exception to its institutions, and moved him to express a desire — it it were not considered as presumptuous — to have it inscribed on his tomb that he was a believer in the religion of Jesus. High emotion, indeed, upon every theme, stamped him. He relieved his earnestness with wit and humor, but had a sort of elephantine dislike for mere levity, triviality, and insignificant playing upon words. This positiveness, reality, and decisive warmth of his feelings, while securing to him many friends, no doubt made him some enemies. With all his ambition, he could not very well be a courtier, — could not strive to win the “sweet voices” of the multitude, or the favor of the few, — could not, like some men, by flattering attentions, please everybody. The oak might as well try and stoop with its branches to kiss those approaching it. He was not capable of being a hypocrite. If those with him were strange or disagreeable to him, he was dark upon them. Strong in his friendships, he never put on his antipathies that disguise of smiling persuasiveness with which some send all their guests away charmed.

Occasionally, perhaps, he was

“Lofty and sour to them that loved him not;
But to those men that sought him, sweet as summer.”

The contempt and wrath which, feeling, he did not dissemble, nor ever meanly wear as concealed weapons, and which are sometimes divine instruments of action in the world, partook of the majesty of his nature, and were awful as the flashing bolt in their display. But whatever sign he showed of that anger and self-will, which even the patriarch found in some of his sons, readily, like the thunder, rolled away, leaving serene as the heavens his spiritual firmament. He was not vindictive. He did not like to harbor malice, but would erase from the permanent record of his words every hostile expression; while his habitual goodness was as deep as his frown was portentous; and a goodness, magnificent as his endowments, came forth, now in substantial tokens of regard, and now in the most resistless captivation of manner.

Shall we say, no perfect renewal had converted his fundamental mood into the complete sweetness which presents the finest, though the rarest, pattern of a man? So there might sometimes be a sullen dash in his temper, or a drop of potent gall in his word. Yet his sweetness, when it came, was absolute, and had all the grandeur of his soul.

Let us, my friends, discourse of him in simplicity; not with the blind, inconsiderate extravagance, which he, the clear, cool, and precise speaker, would, of all men, despise. Death shakes somewhat awhile the scales of judgment. But he, too, like others, must

rest, and would demand to rest, in the balance. It is too much to ask that the moral law should give way to any one. Here, or elsewhere, must I speak of him with sincerity, if at all.

Exalted as were the traits of his behavior, and vast the services rendered by his talents and devotion to his country, — as, according to the one thought I have stated, and tried to illustrate, we revert to the mighty material, by the Constructor himself of the human soul, put into his frame, — we feel, as with other men, there was more of music in him than he made, riches of nature not fully reduced into character, tendencies to excellence which had no complete production into their correspondent lines. Had all his relations been filled out after the interior design, no obstacles could have hindered his rise to every point of power, no backbiting prevented a universal acknowledgment of his worth, and perhaps no criticism detracted from the parallel which would put him into the same mountain-range with Washington in his fame.

It is sad and sorrowful to imply any reserves; and I would as gladly fill up every defect in a masterly character as I would mend a flaw in some priceless jewel, or lift to the top-stone with rejoicing the beautiful and holy cathedral, on whose unfinished tower, in a foreign city, hangs the rusting crane. But let us consider that the true praise of a man is not indiscriminate and fulsome, declaring that he is the only

man, possesses all virtues, and presents the absolute model to copy. “Paint me as I am,” said the English Protector, Oliver Cromwell, himself also great, to the artist who was taking his likeness. Put in every seam of the countenance! *Paint me as I am*, might every great man say to those that laud him; for it is only by shading the light of a man’s moral portrait with just limitations, that his real merits can be clearly seen, fairly owned, or honestly celebrated. The conscientious exception leaves the real object of our love; while vain and thoughtless encomium, hunting for all the shining words of the language, turns out but a smooth and featureless specimen of humanity, that can have no hold on our hearts.

I stand here, and pay him the due and loftiest tribute, in saying, Could he open his marble lips, — nay, could he speak from his heavenly estate, with but the quality he had on earth, there made perfect, — he would ask no compliment but truth; he would utterly refuse unqualified extolling, and zeal in his behalf not according to knowledge; but would stretch out his arms fondly to clasp and strain to his bosom, not his unscrupulous advocate or fawning parasite, but whosoever, affectionately prizing his nobilities, would tenderly note where the pattern was not complete. God knows a pure good-will, running through many years of life, would discharge such reverent office now; for as truly as any man that sits here did

I revere and love him. I remember well, how, more than twenty years ago, when, after having, with his matchless senatorial periods, made eloquent the lips of a band of students, he himself appeared among us, with almost preternatural impression, like old Saul come back to the earth, in that stature, exceeding all his fellows, which in offices, though subordinate, he has ever maintained.

“Pygmies are pygmies still, though perched on Alps;
And pyramids are pyramids in vales.”

If the opinion of some be granted, that he committed errors, they were huge ones, which hardly seemed to be his, but his country's; while he embodied in his person the spirit of the community, as in yonder hall thousands of faces were wont to turn from side to side with the sway of his countenance.

Ah! the great are as a city set on a hill, that cannot be hid. Their slightest mistakes are noted, and blown abroad, and often enormously swollen beyond their dimensions. They are often but as innocent scape-goats, laden and heaped with the people's sins, which they are forced to bear the reproach of, as they carry them away into the wilderness. But this man's habit and propensity was verily to choose and cleave to the right. So his words had in them, beyond all ornament, such breathing and throbbing vitality, that, if his orations were sundered, and severally broken in

pieces, sublime passages of them, like the fragments of Greek sculpture and literature, would endure to distant ages, and fame would blow her trumpet over them through the world. To the youthful imagination, this perhaps chief author of political wisdom since the foundation of our government looked like the capitol of the land, shaped broad and lofty, — the seat of deliberation and source of wisdom.

“ Sage he stood,
With Atlantean shoulders, fit to bear
The weight of mightiest monarchies : his look
Drew audience, and attention still as night,
Or summer's noontide air.”

If his foes will picture him rather as a lion that has been slain, the fact of his singular benefits remains to be solved, like Samson's riddle: “ Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness.” When he drew himself up cold and forbidding, his aspect was terrible, like that of the king of the forest; when angry, he could be fierce; his nature would occasionally break out of the cage of all restraints, and could never take any permanent gloss: but when, as the custom with him was, moral passion inspired his reason, he moved on calm and slow, confiding in what is eternal, with the momentum of fate.

Such was his profoundest inclination. It was not according to the quality of the man to be the tool of any base design, but to be the servant of God and

instrument of righteousness. However his magnanimity may, under any circumstances, have been modified, yet clothed with integrity and true glory was the cause his heart would fitly be allied to and spontaneously espouse; and at death his soul rose clear, strong, and steady to that height after which his life, like almost all human life, — like all our lives, mine and yours, — was a doubtful struggle. Let him be censor who is first sure of the purity and perfectness of his own soul! That courageous fronting of the last foe, or friend rather, though men do not so count him; that tranquil acceptance of the final doom; that undisturbed discharge of all public and private duty, — one eye fixed on earthly duty, and the other on heavenly felicity, — while disease, full in sight, approached the citadel of mortal consciousness; that distinct and deliberate farewell of religious comfort and counsel to each and all around him; that gathering up of himself, even after the manner of Jacob, to die, bowing like a child at the call of God the head no mortal adversary had ever lowered, challenges our undivided honor. Nay, it is all the handwriting of Providence on the tables of our hearts. Naming the name of God, he named also that of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, in his prayer. He stood by the nurture of his childhood, and retained the adherence of his manhood to the faith of the gospel. He relinquished

other supports, he renounced all human confidence and earthly fame, for the mercy of God in Jesus Christ. Verily, hence may come a lesson to our belief; for his excelling intellectual soundness and ability yield from him, the Arguer, an opinion of the Christian argument which cannot be gainsaid by any ancient or modern sceptical ingenuity; — ingenuity, I say; the unbeliever never being the great man, but only the ingenious one. Christianity indeed can derive no lustre from any brilliancy of the parts of man. Christianity rests on no columns of human power and patronage. Christianity will survive all reputations, however fair or colossal. But the respect of the great for her truth may certainly cancel the carping of the little, and the satisfaction of extraordinary set aside the discontent of peculiar minds. Thankful that this man, among us unequalled, settled his convictions and anchored his hope in this divine revelation, let us moor our expectations to the same pillar.

Let, then, that divine arbitrament — humbling to its lines all human greatness — which he owned, and whose rectitude can, to suit no cubit of man's height, be bent; let that Bible, whose reading, even from behind his own memory, spanned his existence, and lent scriptural power to his words; let those hymns of God's praise, at whose resounding his soul ran out streaming as into a child's tears; let that tender-eyed

respect he showed for what is dear in the name of father and the thought of mother, representing the parental Deity; let that suppliant compunction for his offences, from a mouth so finely and massively shaped to honesty, that, in addressing God or man, it could not lie; let that descending angelic faith and hope, which, at break of day on the morning of the world's worship, lifted his o'er-wearied spirit, spent with lingering pain, to its commensurate destiny in the skies, — be all as wide with us, his bereaved countrymen, as was that public presence with which, in princely might, he over-arched our borders and seems still brooding on the land, but half-willing to rise to heaven, unless he can hover round the interests and watch the prospects of the natal soil so dear to him below. Let the purest inspirations of patriotism and freedom, with which, in the times of his earthly glory, he winged our souls, now exalt us to that pitch of Christian wisdom and disinterested national honor, from which alone the coming emergencies of our swift career can be justly met. With his worthiest speech and action, as he trod this mortal stage, and caught the ears of distant tribes to his voice, — whatever was imperfect humanly dropped, whatever was excellent divinely complete, — let him, as in Milton's vision, "vested all in white," come back. So let his enlightening mind and guiding spirit, revisiting us, be received and en-

tertaind. As to-morrow the strife, from which the old leader, whom we have celebrated, is released, will again go on, let us, admonished by God of the end of existence and of the passing away of the world, carry into the conflict of parties and all the turmoil of business those principles of uprightness and truth which he exemplified, and which alone can stand the reckoning of the judgment-day.



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